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Dominic Puthucheary [Malaysia, Member of Parliament, Founder Barisan Sosialis]

Dominic Puthucheary

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Interviewee: **DOMINIC PUTHUCHEARY**

Interviewer: Kirpal Singh

Date: 24 January 2015

Location: Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

0:00:22

Kirpal

Dato, you were born in 1934, that was a period when the world was just emerging from the Great Depression, Malaya was still the Federation with the Straits Settlements and we were still under British rule. Could you describe for us how it felt growing up then?

0:00:42

Dominic

I don't have very strong memories of the early days before independence. But one thing that struck me was the overwhelming presence of the British, in control of everything, and also the kind of poverty that was prevalent at that time, particularly among the Indian working class at that time. It did make an impression on me. My father used to drive up from Johor to Kuala Lumpur, and I followed him. My father had a wide number of friends that he used to visit here. I have always been eavesdropping on adult conversation. India's independence was a major topic among the adults, and that also created an impression on me.

0:02:03

Kirpal

What about the independence that the Japanese were promising all of us? You know that "Take us, and we'll kick the British out, and you'll have a better world, a greater world." Did the occupation make a deep impression on you?

0:02:15

Dominic

Yes, it made a great impression on me, and in a sense, it was also a formative time, because the cruelty of the Japanese was very apparent. My father was a linguist, and he could speak seven languages. He was also a Japanese language scholar of some sort, self-educated. When the Japanese came, they suspected that my father must have been working for the British intelligence, or something, otherwise there was no explanation why he knew seven languages. But the truth was that my father was basically a lover of languages. Anyway, he was arrested by the Japanese, and he was tied with the Sultan of Johor, back to back and left in somewhere for three days, without water or food. Then my father was taken to the Kempeitai (Japanese military police). I remember that scene very well. I stood with my mother outside the Kempeitai office, and my mother refused to leave that office without seeing my father. Subsequently, as the result of the

protest by my mother, a Japanese officer came out, who spoke very good English. My mother then spoke to him, and identified who she was, and I don't know what happened in the conversation. I can't remember, but what finally happened was, my... he brought us both into the office, and my mother was able to see my father. This Japanese gentleman told my mother not to worry, and he said he would look into my father's case. Subsequently we learnt that because of my father's linguistic ability, a bargain was struck that he will work for the Japanese. So, he became a translator for the Japanese. By that time, we had already escaped to a rubber estate for safety, and subsequently my father appeared with escorts by the Japanese, and we were treated well.

0:05:02

[Kirpal](#)

Now in terms of the Puthucherry, whenever that name is mentioned, James and Dom always are yoked together. What would you say was the nature of your relationship with your older brother? How would you define the James-Dominic bond?

0:05:21

[Dominic](#)

James was elder to me by about ten years, and we were very much influenced by Subhas Chandra Bose. When Subhas Chandra Bose came to Malaysia, and formed the Indian National Army, and James was volunteered, not only to join the INA but also to go to the front, Burma front. We were all quite proud of the fact that James was prepared to sacrifice himself for the liberation of India, and all of us participated in the Indian national movement in Malaya at that time, in one way or rather. I was a member of what is called the Balak Sena, that is the army of the youth. I remember carrying a wooden gun, and marching up and down the field, hoping that one day, I would also go and fight for the independence of India. Malaya... the independence of Malaya did not come into the picture at that time. It was India that mattered most, and we were inspired by Subhas Chandra Bose. James was a hero at that time, because he was at the front fighting, and he was taken prisoner there.

0:06:48

[Kirpal](#)

Would you say that to your induction into politics was to some extent influenced by the experiences that your brother had gone through?

0:06:57

[Dominic](#)

I think both, the experience my brother went through, and the whole atmosphere of the times. Because there was the idea of India's independence, Indonesia's independence, and China's fight against the Japanese imperial forces, were all

subject matter in the house. My father was very sympathetic to what has [happened] to the Chinese also. Furious arguments used to take place about this - about the Japanese role in China. So, the whole anti-colonial movement in Asia became an issue that influenced my mind.

0:07:42

Kirpal

At that time most of this stronger political influence came from what we may call, more left-of-centre, right?

0:07:51

Dominic

Yes, generally left-of-centre. There's no doubt about that.

0:07:55

Kirpal

So tell me, from my readings, one of the strategies that the broadly framed Communists in inverted commas had, was to give certain people different roles, like some people went to the schools, other people went to the University, some others went to the workers, and all of that, and you started working with the workers, as a trade unionist, and all of that? Was that something that you personally decided, or were you prompted to do that?

0:08:22

Dominic

I was prompted to do that by Mr Lee Kuan Yew.

0:08:25

Kirpal

Ok, can you tell us a little bit more about how this man got to know you, and what happened, and how he recruited you? Is that the right word - recruit? [Laughter]

0:08:37

Dominic

Yes, yes, you can say recruited me. I was quite well known among young students for being very politically active, and I used to go in and out of Singapore during those days in 1956, just before 1956 after PAP (People's Action Party) was formed. In fact, I was at Victoria Memorial Hall when PAP was formed. I was still... just out of school, but because I had contacts with all sorts of people, there was this ST Bani, who was the son of a trade unionist, after 1956 when James and everybody was arrested, and the trade union movement did not have any leadership, I think my name was mentioned to him, and Lee Kuan Yew...

0:09:34

[Kirpal](#)

To Lee Kuan Yew?

0:09:35

[Dominic](#)

Lee Kuan Yew of course had known James quite well, and so he came to Johor Bahru with ST Bani in his Studebaker and invited me for dinner. As pre-arranged, we went for dinner to this satay stall, very famous satay stall just in front of the railway station, and had a very nice time discussing politics, and what should be done. Kuan Yew was very attentive, and very generous with his explanation. Don't forget there was a big age gap between us and him, and yet he treated us respectfully, and as equals. He was obviously trying to recruit young people to fill in the vacuum in the trade union movement. After that discussion, when he asked me whether I would join him in the movement as such - PAP and the trade union, help him in the trade union movement... he was adviser to several trade unions, and I said yes. I remember him talking to me about what the mission should be. It was not just simply organizing the workers. Kuan Yew, even then felt that the leadership of the trade unions should not be monopolized by the Communists. I still remember his words, he said "Dom, you have to go there, and compete with the Communists for the loyalty of the workers." I looked at him with a little puzzlement, because I never really considered the Communists as enemies. Neither did I have any affiliation as such. The first time that I heard that there is the distinction in the Left between Communist and the non-Communist Left... and I went into the trade union movement, and I worked independently, and met Kuan Yew very often to discuss what was happening in the trade union movement.

0:12:35

[Kirpal](#)

Now there was a lot of talk around that period about winning the hearts and minds of people, and all of that. Do you think this winning was basically an ideological struggle, or an economic struggle, or both?

0:12:48

[Dominic](#)

Both, you have to prove that you stood for something, that would elevate them from their present conditions. We depended on friends to survive, but it was the idea of dedication, for an ideal that is possible, and we worked very hard from morning to midnight. It didn't matter. Food didn't matter, luxury didn't matter, girlfriends didn't matter, nothing mattered except the cause.

0:13:36

[Kirpal](#)

So those were heydays, right? Of idealism, noble goals, and all of that.

0:13:42

[Dominic](#)

Colonialism of course was at the forefront of the struggle. Anti-colonialism was at the forefront.

0:13:47

Kirpal

So, the PAP had been formed. Obviously, there was an inner group, and there was a group next to the inner group. How was it like, the early days of the PAP?

0:13:57

Dominic

Oh, early days were very exciting. The differences never surfaced within the Left and the Right, or nothing of that sort.

0:14:06

Kirpal

They appeared later, right?

0:14:07

Dominic

Yes, much later. But during that formative times where we had to organize the trade unions behind the PAP and the personality of Mr Lee Kuan Yew, and of course Chin Siong was there too, but Lee Kuan Yew was really the centre of that. There was no real difference, though the differences were at a very secretive level, in a deep, distant level, one heard whisper of it, but all that didn't matter to me.

0:14:45

Kirpal

At what point do you think the differences began to manifest themselves? Do you remember how you got wind of that?

0:14:56

Dominic

That was much later, after 1959.

0:15:03

Kirpal

After Singapore attained self-government. These were significant times of real change, and things were in a flux and all that. You and some of your group had pretty strong views about the people who were still held in detention, together with some other values that were not being perhaps as strongly propelled by Mr Lee Kuan Yew. Did that lead to your gradual moving away from the PAP?

0:15:27

Dominic

Yes, that partly contributed to that. But I was not for the break. I was not for the break. I was for working with the PAP, and so the discussions took place in small groups. Ours perhaps were not the most important group. I was considered a junior in the whole system, or the whole movement. Apart from the initial articulation of the folly of moving out from PAP, I went along, and I was then made Vice President of Barisan Sosialis.

0:16:16

[Kirpal](#)

Now you had been a leader in so many different times, and so many different areas, would you say that one of the issues of leadership is that sometimes there's a lack of clarity? The leader perhaps gets a bit distracted, and so the energy gets diffused. Or do you think that it's always a pressure from the outside, that is playing so much on the leader's mind and heart, that in the end, in a sense defeats him just out of sheer tiredness?

0:16:44

[Dominic](#)

The importance of clarity cannot be underestimated. That is absolutely essential. Clarity about what is happening in a particular situation in society. For this you need time. Time to read, time to examine, time to explore, and time to think. Many of us were very active and did not have that luxury of time. But more importantly, we never even had the literature for it. Many of those in the Left, who were converted ideologically, had the benefit only of books, which were rather superficial, pamphlets, magazines, but did not have the deeper intellectual exposure to give us the conceptual tools to understand the predicament that we were in, and to then think out how we can then formulate a policy to meet the situation. That was the big argument that went on without anger, without antagonism to those who differed with us. But unfortunately, it didn't happen all the time. There were people, who were in a hurry, and it is that haste without thought that caused quite a lot of what I would say... the accidental events that led to the loss of good leadership.

0:18:44

[Kirpal](#)

You'll appreciate the fact that obviously in all of this, Lee Kuan Yew played quite a significant role.

0:18:49

[Dominic](#)

Very significant role, yes.

0:18:51

[Kirpal](#)

You remember the time when as a younger lawyer he was defending people on one side of the spectrum, only to quickly change sides, and almost arrest people that he had actually defended.

0:19:04

Kirpal

Looking back, and I know you met Lee Kuan Yew recently as well, in the last few years, what do you think of the man? What did you think of him when you were a very young person, and he was inducting you, and then the process by which the differences emerged, and then after many, many years, re-meeting this man?

0:19:26

Dominic

I admired his intellectual prowess, and his analytical ability in the early stages. Subsequently, when there was a conflict between the Left and Lee, I still admired him, and I felt in retrospect, not at that time, in retrospect, he had a better grasp of the political realities of the times. We did not have that grasp. Ours was, when I say "ours", meaning everybody who then opposed him at that time, was not grounded in the political realities of the time, or the geopolitical realities of Singapore vis-a-vis peninsular Malaysia, or vis-a-vis Southeast Asia. We had no such geopolitical understanding. He had. But our disadvantage was that we did not have the time to think as we said. The dialogue was not there. There was demonization on both sides. There was no dialogue. There was no real dialogue. It was in the context of the Cold War that this happened. That's very important to remember. So, there was the language of the Cold War. The language of the Cold War was not historically accurate. The language of the Cold War was mutual demonization. The intellectual necessity of the times did not emerge. I did grasp it, I tried to understand it, but we were caught. We were caught by the Cold War powers, and the Cold War warriors, deciding on what the vision should be. A small island trying to find an identity with the hinterland; we could not see the larger picture. We saw the smaller picture, and that accounts for the failure of the Left.

0:22:14

Kirpal

So, leaders are born, leaders are made, leaders are sometimes transformed as their leadership patterns unravel new things, or as they encounter different facets of history. How would you personally define the notion of societal leadership?

0:22:31

Dominic

Societal leadership depends on the context in which you talk about. In a complex situation that we are in... that is basically the racial divisions, and the domination of race and religion, the demand for societal leadership that can rise above this is very, very demanding and difficult, difficult. I have tried it when I decided to go back to politics when I went into Gerakan, hoping to build a truly non-racial party beginning with Sabah, where I worked in legal... I was the adviser to Pairin (Joseph Pairin Kitingan), and I helped play a major role in the formation of PBS

(Parti Bersatu Sabah) which took power and trying to convert that together with Gerakan into a national movement, but I was alone. I was alone, and I failed. I failed not because I did not carry out my responsibility, I carried out my responsibility to the full, at the expense of my professional time and everything else. But structurally the racial and religious forces connected with the oligarchs, were too powerful for idealism. Nevertheless, I continued to do that. Therefore, the demand for societal leadership makes a demand on the kind of person you'll have to be. You have to be very strong, you have to keep your soul and never lose hope. You have to be an eternal optimist.

0:24:41

[Kirpal](#)

Can we say that today you're still optimistic about a Malaysian Malaysia, or do you think that is closed now? End of discussion, or do you think it continues?

0:24:52

[Dominic](#)

No, I still work, and sometimes I have to convince my wife that it is still worth working for it. Because sometimes at a moment's notice, I leave the dinner table, or the appointment with her, and meet political personalities, and engage them in the urgency of the matter. That if we don't deal with the crisis intelligently, in a thinking way, then we can slide away into a crisis from which we may not be able to get out easily. There would be too many victims, and too many lives wasted. Already I think as a result of a misconceived history, too many good lives have been lost.

0:26:06

[Kirpal](#)

You have used a very interesting word "victim", that there have been too many victims of a misconceived history already. For my generation, there was an episode that occurred when you were a younger person, and in the context of Singapore's larger politics, and that particular episode still continues to be in some sense, a little bit non-transparent in terms of what exactly happened. You know what I'm referring to. It's sensitive, but looking back at it now, what would you say were your feelings, both as an intellectual, as well as somebody who had been part of the inner group, when suddenly, "Operation Coldstore" came to be?

0:27:03

[Dominic](#)

Looking back, and taking the political realities of today, it was like a catharsis that may have had to have come about because it was a gridlock. A Gordian knot if you want, that had to be broken. Because the way forward was all murky. Something had to give, and something had to change, so I take a philosophical view of what happened at that time, and I want the closure of that past.

0:27:57

[Kirpal](#)

We'll close that. Now you and I have talked outside of this conversation about the role of universities in terms of creating the fertile ground for the emergence of relevant, appropriate and good leaders. Do you want to expand something about that?

0:28:17

[Dominic](#)

I think that is the hope of the country. If the universities cannot function at the center of thought, disagreement and challenge, and the fountain of free speeches as it were, then no country will have hope. It is the universities that breed that intellectual class that I was talking about. It is the universities that have to inspire the intellectual class, and it is that class that comes out from the universities, is going to provide you with the leadership. Both for the grassroots and for governance. The world is too complex to shut out ideas, whatever the ideas are. The real challenge is that, do we have the moral courage to meet an argument that we disagree with intellectually. We say we can, then hope begins.

0:29:24

[Kirpal](#)

Wonderful, thank you Dato for this very wonderful conversation.

0:29:26

[Dominic](#)

Pleasure.

0:29:28

[Kirpal](#)

Thank you.